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SOCIAL CHANGES IN THE BLACK BELT.

When Mr. Lincoln issued his emancipation proclamation, his prophetic sense may have led him to hesitate about cutting loose several million children from their natural protectors and leaving them to shift for themselves. Whether he hesitated or not the momentous consequences of his step can be observed to-day in every part of the South.

Very favorable for such study is a narrow strip on the western side of South Carolina, about five miles wide and ten or twelve long, hemmed in between Stephens Creek and the Savannah river, some twenty miles above Augusta, Georgia, the nearest town or railway station until a few years since. This is a rural locality typical of the wide hill country of the Appalachian slope through the South. It is a black district, the negroes still largely outnumbering the whites. In former days it was occupied by the middle class of "slavocrats" settled on plantations of a thousand acres and upwards, with an average of nearly fifty slaves each, all devoted chiefly to the culture of cotton. The changes have been enormous, and struck the writer with peculiar force after an absence of several years from his old home.

There has been a marked decrease in the black population, while the whites have remained practically stationary. For one or two years after the war the slaves remained with their masters, then there was a general "swapping" all round, every one being anxious to wipe away all vestige of servitude by seeking a new home. Generally then, and almost universally since, they have gone towards the ocean into the towns and villages. Very rarely does one move towards the mountains. Not one family in ten is at the old home. There has also been a considerable falling off in economic efficiency from one point of view at least; the same area supports less people than it did in former days of slovenliness and crudeness. One plantation of eleven hundred acres has less than half the number of souls that lived there under the

overseer. Another has about forty persons where it once had seventy. The neighbor along-side has one family instead of the six or seven that used to find subsistence there. Of course the plantation life of slavocratic literature has also faded away, with its rows of picturesque log cabins, with its planter in spotless linen and broad-brimmed hat, with its rough "boss," cowhide in hand, with its groups of black beings dressed in coarse but strong white homespun, singing and dancing, happy in spite of their degradation.

With the disappearance of this contented microcosm have gone the artisan members. The weaver, the shoemaker, the mason, the carpenter, the blacksmith, the coachman, are no more to be found in this community, though in slavery days nearly every plantation had one or more of each. Often the brightest negro boys were bound as apprentices to white mechanics. In at least two instances white smiths were engaged from a distance at ten dollars a day to train lusty young slaves to hammer and forge. Some of these, when freed, compared favorably in skill with whites, and could have earned high wages at their trade, but so eager were they to fling off old associations that they went out to the field as renters where there would be no one to rule them. Instead of half a dozen blacksmith shops in this community, there is now but one. The nearest is several miles off, and that a white's, who makes a most comfortable living from his bellows and anvil.

It is the same story with skilled labor among the women. The bustling, imperative old black "mamma" cook has lost all her deftness. Waiters, chamber-maids and house servants generally can scarcely be induced to enter service and, when they do, they are almost as clumsy as if freshly imported from Africa. There is hardly one to be found that can even scour a floor satisfactorily. A nurse to attend a child at play in the open air can scarcely be got for love or money. This pride of independence and scorn of service are the more remarkable when it is considered that for a part of the time at least the blacks are not much better than half fed.

Material accumulation has gone steadily forward. Thirty years ago these dark children faced the world with no property save the coarse clothes on their backs and the scanty furniture in their cabins ; with no capital save their " naked human strength." For a time the prejudice against their owning anything more was bitter among the whites. First a cow was bought, then an old horse or lame mule. Now they have as substantial vehicles and as good animals as their old white masters. Instead of walking in crowds to church, they ride in wagons and buggies. In their houses, too, they have beds instead of bunks, varnished tables, painted chairs. Many have sewing machines ; a few have a piano or organ. Cook stoves are not a rarity among them, though they were unknown among whites in their days of domination, for not a single stove was brought into this community until after the war. Though they do not have that land hunger of the fair skinned race, there are two farms in the hands of blacks. Neither is large, but both are managed as well as farms around them. At least three other families are known to have made money enough here to buy homes elsewhere, in the sand belt where prices are not so high.

Though there is scarcely a family but shows comforts unknown to them at " emancipation," almost none have got financially independent. The pleasures of the present blot out the future. What they have they enjoy for the moment and lean on the white man for " advances " during the spring and summer while the crop is making. They pay enormously for this accommodation, the rate of interest being never less than 30 per cent., while 50 per cent. is common, and a hundred and upwards by no means unheard of. Occasionally a white owner tries to induce his tenants to look ahead and save enough from one season to tide them over to the next. But the largest land holder in this section has not yet found a single negro to do this. Usually by Christmas the black has carted off everything saleable that he can possibly spare, not keeping back even enough cotton seed for planting.

It is, however, a hopeful sign that these blacks are filled with ambition to improve their lot. They pay more attention to dress. Many are more careful of their forms of speech, so that there is a marked tendency for the negro dialect to be seriously modified. "They'll sell their souls for an education" is a rather common remark among the whites. But school facilities are still indifferent. The blacks have felt the stress of hard times along with the whites. Ten years ago each race supported a private school supplemented by the public funds. Now each relies on the free school and the children get not much more than half as much instruction in the year as they got formerly. There is no bright prospect of much improvement for either. Yet, in spite of these conditions, nearly all black children from ten to twenty can read and, of course, an appreciable proportion of men can also. A few subscribe for county and religious papers. Only two blacks out of more than a hundred men have the right of suffrage under the educational qualification of the new constitution. There are several dozen that could pass the reading test with ease, but it was generally felt among the blacks that the registration boards were foreordained to turn them down on some pretext or other, and it seemed a useless trouble to make the attempt. As a matter of fact, less than 15,000 blacks in the State can vote, or about one ballot to every ten male adults.

In the higher fields of life there are clear evidences of improvement. For several years after the war they had no place for divine service, except brush arbors built in the solemn depths of the forest, but long since these gave way to substantial frame buildings. Their melody was once poured forth in hymn "lined out" by the minister, but now they use the latest gospel books, and even a choir has been formed to follow the organ. The minister and all his assistants can read with ease, and some of them have attended boarding schools. Their religious zeal is as fervent as ever. "Protracted meetings" are held for two months during the summer, and the fiery tortures of a lost soul are vividly

painted for the sinners. Few have the hardihood to face these awful pains. Scarcely a negro over twelve can be found "outside of the church." Numbers have unfortunately brought dissensions, but every faction can find a home. Only a few miles from here one neighborhood has four houses of worship, all within four miles. Their combined membership would equal one good congregation. Activity in Sunday school work is also marked, one school in this locality having several hundred regular attendants. They follow the international series and know the Bible as thoroughly as the white children. But there is a darker side to their spiritual condition. If we are to believe the frank statements of negroes themselves, the sexual relations among them are frightfully loose. Their night meetings, holding till early morning, kept up for a large part of the summer are not conducive to high morality or bodily health.

This fuller life of freedom has imposed a severe strain on their vitality. They are subject to diseases that they once scorned. In their old careless days it was a nine days wonder for a black to die of consumption, but a large proportion of the deaths among them now are from pulmonary complications. Pneumonia is common, especially during the season of their "big meetings." During the past summer there were several cases on one plantation and the physician was confident that they were caused by reckless exposure and exhausted energies. Nervous and mental disorders are almost as wide-spread among them as among the whites. The rate of mortality, however, is most horrible among infants, and is due to wilful neglect and lack of nourishment and care. It is well known that the black skin is no longer impervious to yellow fever. Why there has been such an enormous change in the constitution of the blacks is a theme of discussion among the whites. Doctors in particular never weary of advancing theories in private conversation and in the medical assemblies. The most common views attribute the physical decline to insufficiency of meat

diet, to sexual excesses, to bad sanitary conditions, such as poor cooking, thin dressing, late hours. A different explanation is given by a practitioner here of wide and long experience. His observation is that the run of these new ailments break out in the mulattoes, the class that tries most to approach the white's standing of life. They waste their nervous strength in this effort and are more liable to subtle assaults on their physical vigor. But, aside from all speculation, a partial reason for the high death-rate may be discovered in the slight medical attention that the blacks get. With the "hard times" of the past few years they have not been able to afford that luxury. They get sick, sink, and die with never a skilled finger on their pulse.

But in spite of this apparently diminished vigor, the race is gradually supplanting the whites in producing cotton, the chief element of wealth in the South, and one of the chief in the United States. This white staple seems to have a curious affinity for the deeper shades of man, as nearly the wide world over it is produced by the dark skinned peoples. It is tedious to cultivate with the single plow and hoe; it is wearisome to gather by hand with bended back. Yet neither in its growth nor in its maturity can labor-saving machinery be used. The white shuns it, the black delights in its fleeciness. He has a lower standard of life, and can compete with cheap labor anywhere, on the plains of India or in the alluvial valley of the Nile. In the South, while the white man works, very little cotton comes directly from the toil of his hands. Several years ago he ceased to hire labor for this crop. The large plantations are rented out, and the small farms are being slowly abandoned to the possession of blacks. Across the Savannah river a strip four or five miles wide and over twelve miles long is now inhabited almost entirely by blacks, the dozen white families having been reduced to three. The blacks are practically tenants, only a few ever purchasing the land they till. Hence the evils of landlord absenteeism will soon cry aloud through the rural South.

Yet when all allowances are made, the black has surely done wonders for himself. A white child requires twenty-one years of preparation for the heavy demands of manhood. All the manifold obligations and activities of this estate were thrust on the black after an hour's notice. It is then a testimonial to their strength and stamina that the entire race has not been stampeded and debauched by this awful test.

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